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ABSTRACT

How the use of the Primary Language Record (PLR), an authentic assessment of young children's literacy development, has influenced teaching and learning in one New York City public elementary school was studied. The study looked at classroom practices; professional development; student work; and the thoughts of teachers, administrators, students, and families at Public School (P.S.) 261 in Brooklyn's Community School District 15 over several months in the 1992-93 school year. The PLR is a vehicle for systematically observing children in aspects of literacy development using classroom events and work samples. It includes a parent interview and the record of a parent conference early in the year, as well as a narrative report on the child as a language user, comments from the child and family, information for the teacher in the following year, and results of reading scales. A description of one first grade classroom illustrates use of the PLR. The PLR can recognize the diverse strengths and knowledge children bring to the school experience as it supports the professionalism and integrity of teachers and involves parents in the educational process. Experience at this school provides some insights into problems and questions in implementing the PLR. (Contains 18 references.) (SLD)

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THE PRIMARY LANGUAGE RECORD AT P.S. 261: HOW ASSESSMENT PRACTICES TRANSFORM TEACHING & LEARNING

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Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the American Educational Research Association
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THE *PRIMARY LANGUAGE RECORD* AT P.S. 261: HOW ASSESSMENT PRACTICES TRANSFORM TEACHING AND LEARNING

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Introduction

Across the country, educators, parents, and policymakers are pressing for changes in the ways that schools evaluate student learning. Persuaded that traditional standardized tests fail to measure many of the important aspects of learning and do not support many of the most useful strategies for teaching (Bradekamp and Shepard, 1989; Darling-Hammond, 1991; Gardner, 1983; Harris and Sammons, 1989; Kantrowitz and Wingert, 1989; Medina and Neill, 1988; Resnick, 1987), practitioners are introducing alternative approaches to assessment into classrooms -- approaches that help teachers look more carefully and closely at students, their learning, and their work (Archbald and Newman, 1988; Bradekamp & Rosengrant, 1992; Wiggins, 1989; Wolf et al., 1991).

New York City is among the districts across the country that is actively engaged in exploring and developing alternatives to traditional tests. Individual schools, community school districts, and the New York City Public Schools Office for Research, Evaluation, and Assessment (OREA) have all been involved in developing and testing alternatives, and in supporting schoolwide and classroom options. These include performance-based assessments in a variety of subject areas, portfolio assessments, and strategies to support teachers' observation of students. The *Primary Language Record*, developed in England and increasingly used in the United States, is one example of a support for teachers' observations of student learning.

This paper is the result of a study that examined how use of the *Primary Language Record* (*PLR*), an authentic assessment measure of young children's literacy development, has influenced teaching and learning in one New York City public elementary school. The study looked at classroom practices, at professional development structures and formats, at the work of students, and at the thoughts of teachers, administrators, children, and families who attend P.S. 261 in Brooklyn's Community School District 15. It sought to understand at close hand how the *PLR* operates in practice and how it can serve to provide better information about student performance for teachers, parents, and the school system. The study also examined the broader benefits for children, teachers, parents, and administrators offered by the *PLR* as it supports teaching, home and school relations, and schoolwide communications about teaching, learning, and children. Finally, the study explored the conditions and practices needed to support the use of this kind of assessment.

The study is based on observations, interviews, and a close examination of student work and school documents over a period of several months during the 1992-

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93 school year. It portrays how a change in the assessment practices of a school can promote a more responsive and responsible environment for teaching and learning.

What is the *Primary Language Record*?

The *Primary Language Record* (Barrs, Ellis, Hester, & Thomas, 1988) was conceived in 1985 by educators in England who were searching for a better means of recording children's literacy progress. Teachers, school heads, staff developers, and central office representatives developed it together as a way of reflecting and supporting existing good teaching practices. It is designed to serve the following purposes:

To support and inform day-to-day teaching in the classroom.

To provide a continuum of knowledge about children as they pass from teacher to teacher.

To inform administrators and those responsible in the community at large for children's work.

To provide families with concrete information about children's progress.

The *Primary Language Record* is a vehicle for systematically observing students in various aspects of their literacy development -- reading, writing, speaking, and listening -- using particular classroom events and samples of work as the basis for recording students' progress and interests; recommending strategies for addressing needs and building on strengths; and discussing ideas and perceptions with the students, their parents, and other faculty. By virtue of what teachers are asked to observe, the *PLR* offers a coherent view of what constitutes progress and development in language and literacy learning. It is grounded in the philosophy that literacy acquisition develops in a manner similar to language acquisition -- through immersion in meaningful and purposeful activities (Bissex, 1980; Calkins, 1983; Hansen, Newkirk, & Graves, 1985; Holdaway, 1979; Smith, 1985). It recognizes that developments in language and literacy do not take place in isolation but take place in diverse contexts that span the curriculum. It encourages teachers to identify children's strengths and note growth points, to regard errors as information, and to analyze patterns of errors in a constructive way.

In these ways, the *PLR* reflects an overall shift in thinking about the learning process -- a shift that emphasizes the importance of teaching that is based on intimate knowledge of the child as well as knowledge of child development, of the curriculum, and of teaching strategies. It also represents a shift in thinking about the purposes and uses of assessment -- a shift that recognizes the importance of looking at growth over time, of observing learning in meaningful, purposeful contexts, of documenting progress through multiple forms of evidence, and of using the collected evidence to inform the teaching process. This shift leads to an overall approach that unites assessment, teaching, and curriculum.

Format of the *PLR*

The structure of *The Primary Language Record* provides a framework in which teachers can observe, document, and learn about the learning of their students in

order to provide more adaptive instruction. It is a way of organizing information and synthesizing that information in order to look at an individual student's growth over time. While it offers a format for recording continuous observations about particular aspects of development and learning, it does not mandate a particular time, schedule, or manner of observing or reporting. Each teacher is free to decide how, when, and where to record information. The structure provided by the *PLR* is in its conception of the teaching and learning process, rather than an insistence on uniform reporting procedures.

The *Primary Language Record* is organized to include the following:

Parent interview - Record of a discussion between the teacher and the child's family member(s) held at the beginning of the school year. The purpose of this discussion is to encourage communication and to establish a partnership between home and school. In this interview, parents' knowledge of the child, both at home and at school, is shared with teachers. Parents have the opportunity to comment on what the child reads, writes, and talks about at home, as well as what changes or developments they have noticed. The interview also elicits parents' observations, concerns, hopes and expectations about their child and his or her experiences of school.

Record of a conference held between the child and teacher at the beginning of the school year, focusing on the child's past experiences, prior understandings, and knowledge of him/herself as a learner.

Summary narrative report focused on the child as a language user. This is culled from documentation of continuous observations of the child, kept by all teachers who work with that child, of the child's progress as well as of experiences or teaching that supported that development.

End-of-the-year comments from the child and family giving their assessment of the child's work and progress during the year.

Information for the child's teacher for the following year, distilled from all the records for the year, enabling teachers to pass on their understandings of the child and to make suggestions about the kind of support the child needs.

Reading scales that provide a developmental framework for children's progress. One scale for younger children assesses their progress on a continuum from dependence to independence. Another for older children charts their developing experience as a reader across the curriculum. Scale scores can be aggregated to describe the reading progress of groups of children.

A Look at a Classroom - The *PLR* in Action

P.S. 261 is an elementary school of 700 students, about 35 teachers and other support staff located in Boerum Hill, a racially and economically mixed neighborhood just south of downtown Brooklyn in New York City. A growing number of teachers there have been using the *Primary Language Record* since the summer of 1991.

Classroom practices of teachers involved in using the *Primary Language Record* share some common characteristics. The ways in which classrooms are

arranged, the kinds of learning activities offered, the ways in which teachers interact with students, and the attitudes teachers have toward learning all are focused on students' need for active engagement with a wide array of literacy activities. A description of Mark Buswinka's first grade classroom tells the story of the kind of teaching that supports and is supported by the *Primary Language Record*'s use.

Mark's classroom is organized into several areas, all well-stocked with a rich array of materials. In addition to an extensive library of children's literature, there is a block area, a dramatic play area, an animal/nature area, an art area, and an area where manipulative math materials are organized. Desks are clustered in groups. Children's work is attractively displayed both inside and outside the classroom walls.

The schedule of the class's day is structured so that long stretches of time are available for children to engage in different activities in the various areas of the room. While some periods of time may be devoted solely to literacy activities, within this time children have many different choices.

For example, both reading and writing take place simultaneously during the morning. Some children sit alone or with a partner, reading books which they choose according to their interests and tastes. In one section of the room, a small group of boys takes turns reading out loud to each other. They appear to know these texts almost by memory. They show each other how to use the pictures to help figure out unknown words.

Some children are in the Listening Center - an area in the classroom set up for the playing of cassette tapes. Here children read their books along with a taped version of the story. Other children gather together on the rug around a "Big Book." It is the size of giant easel paper, has large pictures, over-sized print, and phrases that have a catchy rhythm and pattern to them. The children read it together by pointing to each easily distinguishable word as they go along.

Writing activities are also going on during this time. Writing is broadly interpreted in this class so that children are allowed to express themselves in a range of ways. Some children draw; some make marks of unrelated letters; some use "invented spelling" (self-initiated phonetic spelling of words); and a few use words written in conventional form.

As these activities go on simultaneously, Mark moves about the room, notecards in hand, assisting and facilitating different situations. After answering the questions of a group of children who are writing together in one corner of the room, he sits individually with a succession of children. He helps one child read by pointing to the words as they go along. He helps another by reading back to her what she has already written. He helps another child by taking dictation of her story in the little book that she has made and illustrated. He helps still another by encouraging her to identify initial sounds of the words she wants to spell. With each child, he jots a few notes down on his notecards to remind him of the nature of their interaction.

How the *PLR* Influences Teaching and Learning

Impact on the Learning Environment

Classrooms like Mark Buswinka's are a logical outgrowth of experience with the *Primary Language Record*. Using the *Primary Language Record* has supported him and other teachers in developing more open, flexible classroom arrangements and in utilizing a greater range of learning materials and experiences. This is evident in the scheduling of their day, which provides for greater integration of subject matters and

which connects literacy development across the curriculum in meaningful and purposeful contexts. A teacher explains:

> The *PLR* presupposes that learning takes place within a social context, and that the responsibility for growth doesn't lie only with the teacher but is shared with children and parents. And it presupposes that classrooms are set up in flexible ways. For instance, how can you record kids' talk if they are not able or allowed to talk to each other in the classroom? Teachers have to change things in order to do the *PLR* and changing those things changes how they teach (Alvarez, 1991, p. 11).

Impact on Teaching Practice

The *PLR* process of observing and documenting students and their work has also led many teachers to adopt an individualized approach to their teaching. It has expanded teachers' instructional practices by heightening their sensitivity to the diverse range of learning styles that children have as well as to the diverse forms in which children can express that learning. Through careful observation of student work and subsequent reflections on the observations, teachers gain an increased awareness of the different strategies children use in learning to read. This enables them to then provide more knowledgeable interventions by analyzing strategies, supporting those that are being used, and introducing those that are not. For example, careful observation of one child may reveal that the child has a grasp of syntax and meaning, but needs more support in phonetic skills. A close look at another child may reveal something entirely different: the child has phonetic skills but has not been able to connect those skills with the general meaning generated by the text. A teacher who is observant and knowledgeable about these differences can use this information to support children's reading growth.

As the *PLR* helps teachers to observe and document the growth of individual children, it makes each child's actual growth more visible and consequently enables teachers to be more appreciative and supportive of children's strengths. Rather than "teaching to the test," teachers are supported in their desire to "teach to the child."

The *Primary Language Record* has thus helped teachers to develop keener understandings of literacy development as well as enriched understandings of the teaching/learning process in general. For many experienced teachers this has taken the form of validation to their long-established child-centered philosophies and practices. Alina Alvarez, a teacher with 15 years experience, says:

> *The Primary Language Record* has supported my view of children and of learning by encouraging observation of students' reading, writing, speaking and listening in the context of classroom activities. It offers me a framework in which I can pull together and organize these observations. This provides me with concrete information about each students' learning process which then guides my teaching in a way that standardized test scores and preconceived developmental checklists simply cannot do.

For less experienced teachers the *PLR* has served as a teaching guide. Mark Buswinka, who has been teaching for six years, says:

> *The Primary Language Record* has helped me learn how to teach. It is the first real reading course I've ever taken. No one ever said, "Look at kids" to me. Courses I took just said, "Do this to them, or do that to them." But with the *PLR* I can really watch kids and see how they develop. It helps me know what to look for. By watching them I can learn. I'm working with them, not doing things to them. The *PLR* lays it right out. It is a framework for the kind of teacher I want to be.

Support for Teacher Inquiry and Collegiality

Many teachers using *The Primary Language Record* also experience a sense of personal growth and development. They see the in-depth examination of children and their learning that is called for by use of the *PLR* to be an impetus for building professional knowledge. They value the collegial collaboration, reflection, and dialogue that the *PLR* stimulates. They see new possibilities for their teaching as they engage together in asking questions and discussing their work. They consider their involvement in such activities to be essential elements of their professional development.

As a result of these kinds of experiences, teachers find themselves increasingly able to replace judgments about children with assessments based on compassion and understanding. They also become more confident about what it is that they know and they become more comfortable talking about it. One teacher describes the impact of sharing with her colleagues:

> If a teacher just did this on her own and didn't talk to anyone else about it, I don't think it would foster reflection. But when teachers talk with each other in a group about kids' strengths and weaknesses, there's a mixture of different kinds of thinking, and that helps us look at kids and figure out how to help them grow.

Other teachers concur. They believe that use of the *PLR* at P.S. 261 has promoted an atmosphere of continual learning in the school, has increased teachers' understandings, enhanced their commitments, and promoted professionalism as well as a sense of community. This has in turn has impacted on the students by supporting their growth as readers and learners.

Influences on Student Learning

The professional growth of teachers that is encouraged by the *Primary Language Record* translates directly to student growth and their attitudes toward reading. Because using the *PLR* encourages teachers to better connect with students and their work, reading, writing, and the school experience in general appear to become more pleasurable and productive for the students involved. Alejandra[1], a first grade student, describes how she finds enjoyment in books:

> Reading is fun. I like books to play with. I read the title of books I know. I look at the pages inside of it, and then I start reading. I play with the books at home....play school. I read to Grandma and Mom and Dad and my aunt and myself and my doll.

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[1] Children's names have been changed throughout this paper.

Children's literacy development, as well as their educational growth in general, is supported by having teachers who are more observant of what they actually can do and who use this knowledge to inform their teaching practice. Relying on the concrete evidence of children's work leads teachers to look at children through their strengths rather than through their deficits. This is helpful to all students. It appears to be especially so for children with special needs - those with special learning challenges and those who are dominant in languages other than English. Lucy Lopez, a kindergarten through second grade bilingual special education teacher, recounts how keeping a diary of her observations has clarified her understandings about particular children and subsequently affected her ability to help them learn.

> Jeremy had me confused. He doesn't speak in complete sentences; sometimes he'll only talk in Spanish. I thought he didn't understand. But from watching him in different settings and from interviewing him for the *PLR*, I learned that he *can* talk appropriately and he *does* understand.
>
> There is another child, Jorge, whom I used to think was not learning -- that he was hyperactive. I used to focus more on his behavior. Now it doesn't bother me as much. I focus on what he *can* do. I found that if things are presented to him in context, if he has visual aids around him, he *can* get it.
>
> Using the *PLR* has helped me to focus on the kids more -- to see what they say and about what. It has helped me to understand them more, to understand their language in different situations, to focus more on how they communicate, to see their needs and their strengths.

Students' learning is thus supported by the increased knowledge and understanding that teachers get from their exposure to the *PLR*. Students benefit from their teachers' professional development through the help students receive in refining their skills. They are strengthened by their teachers' recognition of the complexities of the learning process. This understanding makes it less likely for teachers to categorize students in static ways and more likely instead to descriptively observe nuances in student strengths and learning styles. Children are given greater room for the expression of their individual styles, paces, and interests because the classroom environment is more open to diversity. They thrive in a dynamic that supports the strengths and that values the complexities of learners.

Still another benefit for students of the *PLR* is that it provides students with the opportunity to have input into their learning process. Through the use of student interviews and conferences, teachers are informed about children's prior knowledge and interests, about what children presently understand, and about what children also know about their own learning style and process. The result of this is to enhance teacher responsiveness to student needs.

In a conference with her teacher, Carla revealed how much she knows about the purposes of print:

> You make nice people, nice writing, pictures of cats. Then you put the words. Then you write what it is about, then you show it to the people that like it. If it is for them, you give it to them.

In this same conference, Carla also revealed several of her own learning strategies:

> If I don't know [something], I ask what it says. Then I watch them [Mom, Dad] read it to you and then you know the title and what it is about. Then you can read it by yourself. If no one is there, you figure it out yourself by listening and thinking. When you get it, you show your mom what you can do.

Influences on Home and School Relationships

Partnerships between home and school are strengthened through the use of the *Primary Language Record*. It fosters sensitivity and support for family cultures and languages. It values and uses parent knowledge. It promotes enhanced communication between home and school by offering greater opportunity for family input into the learning process.

> As part of my *PLR* work, I interviewed the parents of all the children in my class. In the past, I always thought that I had respect for parents, but I was amazed at how much I could learn from them about literacy. I was struck by how much parents know about their kids in general and about their literacy development in particular. I was also amazed at how much I didn't know about the parents themselves. I gained a heightened awareness of and respect for their backgrounds and cultures.

The *PLR* serves also as a vehicle for family education. In family conferences, teachers are able to use the evidence they have compiled throughout the school year to clearly demonstrate student growth. Teachers share with parents such developmental markers as the books that children read, the strategies that children use most readily, the strategies in need of support, and the interests and approaches that children bring to their learning. These concrete examples of literacy acquisition are enhanced by the developmental understandings and teacher research on which the *Primary Language Record* is based. A teacher explains:

> [Through my work with the *PLR*] I learned to listen to parents differently and to help them develop a positive, sometimes different, perspective on their child by reflecting back to them what they already know. This has enabled me to develop a partnership, rather than a one-sided relationship, in which I am the expert telling them what I know.

Through concrete examples found in children's work, teachers are also able to interpret and explain to parents innovative teaching practices such as invented spelling. The result of such communication is the conscious building of a community that is knowledgeable and supportive of children's learning. One parent reflects on what she has learned about her child:

> I've learned how to look [at my child] from areas of strength. I've gained confidence in what is happening with him.

Another parent says:

> A lot of stuff that [the teacher] exposed me to made sense to me as a parent. I'm learning to relax, learning to help my children with less anxiety. It's been very very helpful. It's helped me to understand my own learning in a more objective way. It's important to understand how you learn because it helps you understand how others learn. It's made learning a lot more fun. Parents want to be a part, feel relaxed and at home, so that they can do more for their kids.

Implications for Accountability

As a result of using the *Primary Language Record*, teachers and schools become more accountable to students, to themselves, and to their community. The day to day observations of children which form the basis of the *Record* guide teaching in more child-centered ways. This makes it harder for students to "fall through the cracks" because teachers keep track of what and how their students are learning. Close examination of their students' work, combined with reflection on and discussions of their teaching practice, build teacher knowledge about literacy and the learning process.

The joint sharing of information in the interviews and conference portions of the record -- from family to school, from school to family, from student to teacher, and from teacher to student -- also make for a more thorough and rounded accountability picture. The summary in the record that is written for the child's next year's teacher, provides a unique opportunity for knowledge about a student to be constructed and shared with a measure of continuity throughout the school. This collaborative following of a child's growth from year to year, along with the essential ongoing dialogue among teachers that is a critical part of the *PLR*'s use, promote a professionalism in the school that strengthens its accountability to all parties involved.

The *PLR* also can useful as a tool for public accountability. The process of keeping the record itself permits teachers to be accountable in a comprehensive way and supports the quality of instruction. The fullness of the picture the *PLR* provides for each child demonstrates the school's integrity and thoroughness with regard to individual children. In addition, the reading scales can be used to aggregate meaningful, quantifiable data on groups of children, if that is necessary or desired.

Lessons for Implementing the *Primary Language Record*

Successful implementation of an innovation such as the *PLR* throughout a school and within the public school system at large, presents several major structural challenges:

- Providing time within the structure of the school day and year for the observing, recording, and conferencing work that the *PLR* requires.

- Restructuring reporting systems and practices so that communication between family and school is consistent with the concepts of teaching and learning that the *PLR* promotes.

•Lessening the grip of traditional standardized tests on teaching to minimize the tension between the values and goals of those tests and the approaches to learning encouraged by the *PLR*.

•Providing professional development opportunities for teachers that encourages them to talk and reflect on their work with students, to synthesize what they observe about children with what they know about literacy acquisition and child development. This reconceptualized notion of professional development needs to replace workshop versions of staff "training" in which teachers receive recipes for instruction from appointed experts.

•Ensuring administrative support that endorses and facilitates use of innovations like the *PLR*.

•Developing parental and community understanding and support for authentic assessments such as the *PLR* through parent discussions with educators, exposure to professional literature, and access to displays of children's authentic work.

Challenges for the Future

The story of the *Primary Language Record*'s use at P.S. 261 provides a portrait of how changes in assessment practices can influence teaching in ways that support the growth of both children and adults. This story reveals the strengths of the *PLR* in the ways it can recognize the diverse strengths and knowledge that children bring with them to the school experience, support the integrity and professionalism of teachers, value different cultures and languages, and involve parents meaningfully in the education of their child.

What stands out from this examination of the *PLR's* use at P.S. 261 is that, more important than the procedures and processes it presents, the *PLR* supports a different way of thinking about teaching and learning in general and about literacy development in particular. It offers a holistic framework for observing and documenting the growth of children that allows for differences in teachers as well as in children. It enables teachers to understand better how children learn and thus to teach in more child-centered ways. By focusing on children's strengths, by looking at them individually, by celebrating their diversity, it supports the overall quality of school instruction.

The *PLR* also poses a different model for professional development -- one of ongoing collegial dialogue and reflection. It offers the rich, full, and rounded picture of a child, gained through observation and documentation of the child's growth over time, as an alternative to the one-dimensional information culled from norm-referenced standardized tests.

This study of the *Primary Language Record* in use at P.S. 261 demonstrates the many benefits it can offer to teachers and schools, parents and children. How to implement it in a broad yet effective manner -- within other schools and throughout an entire district -- is the next challenge that needs to be addressed. P.S. 261's experience with the *PLR* provides some insights into problems and questions that can be expected to surface. Finding a way to support teachers at different stages of development, finding a way to make an impact on a large school, finding a way to support a shift in thinking about teaching and the subsequent instructional implications

of this shift, finding a way to provide ongoing support for both the introduction of this innovation and its institutionalization in the school, are just some of the challenges ahead.

Each school faced with the challenge of developing teaching and assessment practices that support children's growth, must find its own way, indigenous to its own culture and needs. What P.S. 261's experience has shown is that the *Primary Language Record* can provide a framework for this journey.

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